

Life In Lighthouse Switch On Lighthouse Keeping

By DOROTHY M. JACOBSEN

It's a few years now since young Frank Davis, a real "Down-Mainer," took his 19-year-old bride to the lighthouse on Duxbury Pier—46½ years, in fact.

Even then, it was not to live there all the time, but for a brief eight days a month while the partner in the two-man lighthouse team went ashore.

Now Grandparents

The amiable Davises, now of Coconut Grove, Fla., are spending their annual four months in Duxbury, while Mr. Davis finishes building a boat he and his son, Frank, plan to take to Florida, by water, of course.

Now a pleasant white-haired grandmother of six, Mrs. Davis recently reminisced about her experiences as the wife of a lighthouse keeper and a young mother, insisting all the time that her life wasn't too different from other people's.

"There was a time, though," she confessed, "When I didn't see another woman to speak to for six months."

Outside of the time she spent with her husband at Duxbury Pier, there was never another time she lived in a round lighthouse. (The rest of the time, she and her family lived in a house near the lighthouse.)

If she had been unhappy, she pointed out, there were certainly no corners to go sulk in.

"But we were happy," she added.

Actually, her husband was her "one and only," she said. "I was 17 when Frank came to buy a boat from my father who owned a boatyard. My father was English and very strict with his girls, but I guess he sized Frank up and thought I'd be safe. Anyway, he let me go out with him. Later, my husband always told people that he bought a boat and I was thrown in for good measure."

Life in a lighthouse, for all the Davises say it wasn't different, doesn't sound a bit like a life most women would choose today. Catching rain-water for everyday use, a pump in the sink and kerosene lamps, one room per floor and periods of little or no outside company must have discouraged more than one would-be-bride of a lighthousekeeper, but the Davises insist it was a wonderful life.

Huckleberry Finn

There was plenty of hunting and fishing. If you wanted duck for dinner, you went out and got it.

In fact, according to the youngest Davis, son Frank, if

his experiences were recorded in a book, it would "make 'Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn' look sick."

As for the family-breakdown that worries sociologists today, it just wasn't a worry around the lighthouse. Father, mother, two boys and a girl were together, yet had more freedom than many children do today.

Their love of the sea has never left them. Son Frank has a boatyard in Duxbury, Olive Davis Cookson a registered nurse is married to Lt. Commander William Cookson (USN) and lives in Miami, Fla., and George Davis, the first-born, has a boatyard in Plymouth.

When George was three weeks old he made the trip six miles down the coast in November with his mother in an open boat to Tarpaulin Cove Light on Naushon Island, in Buzzard's Bay, the family's second station.

"When he was asleep," said Mrs. Davis, "I remembered I had promised my mother I'd telephone her. Mother was hard of hearing, so I had to shout to make her hear me over that old crank telephone. The noise woke the baby and he began to cry."

"Well, he cried and I cried, and he cried and I cried all night. It was really something."

If that was a frightening experience for a brand new mother, Mrs. Davis had many more ahead of her.

The night the schooner 'Tanzy Bitters' blew up and Keeper Davis rescued two badly burned men and brought them into the kitchen. Mrs. Davis treated them with salves while her husband went to Martha's Vineyard to get the doctor, who later said he couldn't have done more for the patients than Mrs. Davis had.

In all the excitement, the young wife didn't forget to tend the lighthouse light.

Both men later died, but the daring rescue was included in the Congressional record and in the Coast Guard record.

Narrow Escape

Another time, Mrs. Davis, with ankle-length coat and rub-

ber boots, went out with her husband in a boat while he salvaged some abandoned anchor chain from a barge which had gone aground.

His 22-foot boat was well-loaded with possibly a ton of chain. He was guiding it through the channel, around floating ice cakes, when he ran into one ice cake he had mistaken for slush.

It ripped a hole in the bow of the boat and water was rushing in. The young lighthouse keeper called to his wife to steer for shore.

Meanwhile, he threw himself flat and plugged the hole with his arm. Fortunately, he was clad in a heavy pea coat so the sleeve helped to staunch the flow, but the icy water was running down his neck.

Unaware of the mishap, Mrs. Davis obediently steered to shore and just as they arrived safely, the boat sank.

The next station was at the southern peninsula where they lived in a conventional six-room house. While it might seem less romantic than keeping house in a lighthouse, life on the Gurnet proved the setting for some of the happiest years of the Davis family's life.

Famous Lighthouse

'On a high bluff at the southern tip of the Gurnet, looking out across lower Massachusetts Bay, stands 'Gurnet Light'. (from Edward Rowe Snow's book, 'Famous Lighthouses of New England')

Here Mrs. Davis was paid \$11 per month to hoist the storm warnings, flags by day and lanterns by night. Ironically, it was her husband who did it for her most of the time.

There's a lot to do around a lighthouse, for both the keeper and his wife," said Mrs. Davis.

"Especially when you have children. It's important to keep close supervision when they're little — not to let them near the water when they shouldn't be there and to teach them what to do when they do get near the water is a big job in itself."

Having the only daughter on the island with a 12-man Coast Guard Station nearby might have presented a problem, but the then teenage Olive was simply forbidden to go to the station. She obeyed.

Weather Or Not

Transportation might have been troublesome, too, but the dauntless Mrs. Davis was up to it. She became a pioneer in

driving across the sand dunes in a Model T in a day when few women drove at all.

It was necessary, because by then, there were three children to be chauffeured to school.

"We went in all kinds of weather and even delivered the children to school when there wasn't any school because conditions were too bad for the townspeople. The principal had forgotten to notify us and we had no way of knowing."

"For a little while," said Mrs. Davis, "the Duxbury pupils didn't think my three belonged in Duxbury, but after a fight or two, they were well accepted."

Then the Davis home became the envy of all their classmates.

"One time," reminisced Mrs. Davis, "I was driving the children somewhere in a brand new Model T touring car. There were duck blinds on the beach at that time, and I saw a flock of geese. In order to avoid any danger, I drove further down on the beach, and a great wave washed right over the car."

Frankie was a little fellow then, and he had a new hat he thought he'd lost, so he started right into the water after it, until I called him and told him I had it right there.

"The car was dried off with a blowtorch and we went on our way." Another time, Mrs. Davis, in the traditional long white gown of the Eastern Star, started home from a meeting during a "terrifically high tide."

She had driven up one sand dune, down again and up another.

At the top of the second one, her car got stuck.

"So I just took off my shoes, tucked my gown out of the way, and walked home," declared Mrs. Davis.

And once after a hurricane, she insisted on getting back to the lighthouse so her husband wouldn't worry.

After an adventurous trip back including a perilous drive under a half-fallen tree, she reached the lighthouse safely.

When she walked into her house, her husband greeted her with typical 'down-east' nonchalance.

"I didn't look for you tonight."

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SEATED AT THE TILLER of her son's sailing craft, is Mrs. Frank Alan Davis. The pose is reminiscent of her 46½ years as the wife of a lighthousekeeper. This seafaring grandmother witnessed much action on the seas and sand dunes and is still so active in Duxbury and Florida that it's difficult to catch up with her on land or sea.

(Photo by Steven A. Hansen)

